

RIP. MIX. BRAND.

The first in a three-part series on the future of branding.

There is something weird happening in the world of brands. Under the radar, outside the sometimes sterile corporate conversations about market positioning, brand valuation and corporate identity, a cultural revolution is under way. Like an atom smasher, our accelerating postmodern culture is hurtling people and brands together at a higher and higher rate of speed, and the results of their collision are stranger—and more compelling—than we could possibly have imagined.

For starters, to many people, brands aren't simply in the culture, they *are* the culture. Marketers traditionally thought of brands as making promises about products and services, and have measured brands by how well they delivered on those promises. But today, brands are increasingly serving another function: they have become the tools with which people construct their personal and social identities. Survey the brand-landscape and you'll find dating Web sites that match singles by their brand preferences—"Single Coke Male seeks Sony Female for hot times." You'll find a Starbucks that just opened in the lobby of a Midwestern megachurch and you'll find people being buried out back in Harley-Davidson-branded caskets. Brands have gone from being the glue that ties companies and consumers together to being the glue that holds our very souls together.

This is part of a much larger cultural and economic story. The marketplace has become the central meaning-making institution in many people's lives, augmenting, and in some cases replacing, everything from political to religious affiliation. Ask an average citizen to name their congressional or city council representative and you'll likely get a blank stare, but everybody, it seems, has a passionate opinion about Wal-Mart, Starbucks or Microsoft.

America has always had a mercantile society, but the intimacy between people, brands and culture began to intensify in the early 1980s when state and federal governments started to deregulate markets and curb public sector spending. With this rollback of government, corporate involvement in daily life began to increase dramatically, and brands

reached into the public sphere as never before.

Depending on your perspective, this led to either a virtuous or vicious cycle: As government retreated, the role of private institutions expanded, justifying even more government withdrawal. As a result, museums and cultural institutions today must seek out corporate underwriting and accept corporate branding to fulfill their mission—there are no government budgets to support them. One-quarter of California public school students now eat branded fast food in their cafeterias. School principals are forced to cut deals with the likes of McDonald's and Taco Bell to fund extracurricular arts and sports programs because sufficient funds are no longer

provided by the state. ("We're forced to choose between well-rounded kids and well-rounded kids," joked one principal I spoke with.) Government Acquisitions Inc., a North Carolina-based company, recently started offering small-town police squads free police cruisers covered, NASCAR-style, in corporate advertising, because state governments are no longer able to pick up the tab for their vehicles. These, and countless other examples have erased the boundaries of "the market," and made the brand-landscape virtually inescapable.

Now we get to the counterintuitive part of this story. This blossoming of branding in every sphere of life has not reduced us to mindless consumers—in many quarters, it's had just the opposite effect. From Skater Kids to Soccer Moms, a new ethos of brand participation is emerging. People now increasingly see brands as shared cultural property, rather than privately owned intellectual property. Familiarity breeds ownership: brands are ours, not the companies that supposedly own them.

People do funny things with brands when they believe that they own them. They tattoo logos on their forearm. They form social groups on Meetup.com and get together with other members of their brand tribe. They add, subtract and remix the meanings supposedly dictated by the brand's corporate parent. And they do all of this without asking for permission.



This puts many marketers and brand loyalists on a collision course, often with absurd consequences. When AOL Time Warner purchased the rights to make a series of films from the *Harry Potter* books, for example, one of the first things they did was send threatening letters to the parents of children who had published fan fiction on their Web sites. The company said that it was concerned that the children's efforts would dilute the value of their brand and confuse the marketplace. (There's a lesson here: If you find yourself suing your 9-year-old customers, it's time to change your business model.)

Compare AOL Time Warner's experience with that of George Lucas. Passionate and geeky *Star Wars* enthusiasts are so loyal to the brand that they are literally making their own (surprisingly good) *Star Wars* movies at home, using digital camcorders and their laptop computers. (You can see some great examples at <http://www.theforce.net/theater/>.) Rather than try and fight these brand devotees, Lucas is enabling them by distributing online "reference" *Star Wars* sounds and visual effects that they can drop into their DIY fan films. Lucas has learned one important lesson of participatory branding: if you can't beat 'em, make 'em better. Unfortunately, Lucas is the exception, not the rule.

The brands-as-participatory-culture ethic is here to stay, and it requires that corporations adopt a significantly different view of what their brands are and what they mean. Market researchers have a vital role to play here, but traditional measures—such as unaided recall—simply won't cut it. What we need to do is help corporations dig deep into the culture, and unearth the complex web of meanings and social participation that surrounds their brands. We need robust ethnographic and qualitative research to help them find new ways of connecting in a peer-to-peer, open way with their constituencies. And we need to help companies understand and take their new role—as stewards of human meaning, not just economic value—seriously. ■

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